



Sincerely
M. Moore

MORDECAI CUBITT COOKE

(1825-1914)

H. T. GÜSSOW

WITH PORTRAIT, PLATE I

There is carved upon a certain tombstone in St. Mary's Islington Cemetery at East Finchley, England, the representation of a lowly and obscure plant. The image excites the curiosity of the visitor for it embodies a toadstool. Why, among all the beautiful and ornate members of the Vegetable Kingdom, should the choice fall on such an unattractive member?

Yet this little toadstool, linked with the name of the man resting beneath the tombstone, has a history, and with reverence the interested visitor will remember this. To us the toadstool is a *Coprinus*, or to be quite scientific, *Coprinus micaceus* of Fries—and its clump will remind us of the little woodent which adorns the cover of the "Handbook of British Fungi" of which he, who lies beneath the tomb, was the author—Mordecai Cubitt Cooke, the veteran mycologist and pioneer of British Mycology.

Mordecai Cubitt Cooke's life affords several generations of botanists as well as the present, ample food for thought. His unique training, his phenomenal interest in the natural sciences, his zeal in imparting such interest to the young, his untiring pen and his retiring nature stand out prominently among the characteristics of this remarkable man.

He was born at Horning, Norfolk, England, on the 12th of July, 1825. His father Mordecai Cooke was a member of an old respected Norfolk family which in past times spelled their name Coke. Mordecai—an old Semitic name—was a traditional one, which had been in the family for many generations. Mordecai Cooke, senior, was in early manhood connected with the manufacture of bombazine, once a thriving local industry. He married Mary, daughter of William Cubitt, a schoolmaster of the neighboring village of Neateshead. On his marriage he opened a village store,

which is now the Horning Post Office, and it was here that their eldest son Mordecai Cubitt Cooke was born in 1825.

At an early age he went to a local dame's school where he remained until 1834. From there he went to Ilford to continue his education under an uncle, the Rev. James Cubitt, a Baptist minister, who, being learned in classics and mathematics, afterwards became a tutor at the famous Spurgeon's College.

In 1838 young Cooke returned to Horning taking with him from his learned uncle a useful knowledge of ancient languages, algebra, and a love for observations and study of art and science. We then find him attending a local school at Neateshead.

In 1840 he was forced through circumstances to interest himself in the trade of a wholesale draper, to whom he was apprenticed, but this occupation proved heartily distasteful to a young fellow of his natural inclinations. In 1845 he again went back to London. Young Cooke was a romantic youth—in character like certain heroes portrayed by Ibsen, mayhap likeliest of all to Peer Gynt—impressionable, loving freedom and yearning for knowledge.

At the age of twenty-one he published a volume of verse (I am told of no particular merit) entitled *The Struggle of Freedom and other Poems*.

He interested himself greatly in poetry and literature generally and we find him lecturing and writing thereon; at that time, no doubt, augmenting by these means the meagre income which he earned in his capacity of copying clerk in a solicitor's office.

The next few years the young man spent in the search for some more congenial and permanent occupation. He made himself acquainted with the system of education of Pestalozzi, and for a brief period taught this method as a pupil teacher in an infant school, kept by an uncle and aunt of his, at Stockton-on-Tees.

He then was fortunate in securing an appointment as headmaster of the National Schools at Lambeth, where he remained during the years 1851-1860. He continued with fervour his botanical studies, gained a first class certificate in botany and founded the Society of Amateur Botanists. Here he became acquainted with Worthington G. Smith, another ardent lover of nature, and a botanist of no mean achievement. It is natural that this association led him to become more specially interested in the study of micro-fungi and fungous parasites. During this time he prepared a comprehensive account entitled *A Plain and Easy Account of British Fungi*, of which the fourth edition appeared in 1860.

No doubt, his famous little books for the young, small octavo shilling manuals by "Uncle Matt," evolved during this time too. Cooke loved children to his old age, and his simple language was certainly calculated

to endear his books to the children. From his *Down the Lane and Back in Search of Wild Flowers* his kindly interest in the young is apparent. Charming words are contained in the preface:

"Dear children, this book is for you. I have written it for you, to help you to learn a little more about the wild flowers than you know, and yet not to trouble you with any more hard words than I can help. You love flowers, and so do I, and the more you know of them the better you will love them. I have pointed out the way to Cissy, how she was to find out their little secrets, and what I have said to her I say also to you. If you will follow her to do as she did, you may learn, as she learned, that the most common weed has a story to tell which may be told to a child; that nothing to Him, who made it, is common or unclean; and that wayside weeds have their place to fill and their duty to do in the world if only—

To comfort man, to whisper hope whene'er his faith is dim;
For Who so careth for the flowers will much more care for him.

While in Lambeth he made the acquaintance of P. L. Simmonds, author of *Economic Products of the Vegetable Kingdom*, and in 1861 he was engaged by Dr. Forbes Watson of the India Office to catalogue raw vegetable products, and so forth, that were sent to England for exhibition purposes. On completion of this work he was appointed to a post as Botanical Assistant in the India Museum at Fife House, Whitehall, London. During the years from 1862-1868 he acted as Editor to *Science Gossip*.

About 1865 he became actively interested in fungi, no doubt greatly stimulated by Berkeley with whom he became intimately acquainted and later closely associated. Then follow in rapid succession—his energy as it were a pent up flood suddenly released—numerous works from the pen of this "inveterate" writer. *Our Reptiles*; *Manual of Structural Botany*; *A Fern Book for Everybody*; *Manual of Botanic Terms*; *Rust*, *Smut*, *Mildew and Mould*.

In 1872 he commenced *Grevillea*, first published monthly, later on quarterly. This journal of Cryptogamic Botany has a wide circulation and brought Cooke specimens of Fungi from all over the world, and the number of new genera and species described by him was immense. In consideration of his interest in American mycology some singular honours were conferred upon him. The University of St. Lawrence in 1870 gave him the honorary degree of Master of Arts; in 1873 Yale conferred the same honour; and in 1874 New York University made him an honorary LL.D. In 1877 the Linnean Society elected him an Associate, and Mycological Societies all over the world made him an honorary member. In going over this long list it is curious to find that no German Society appears to have likewise honoured Cooke.

In 1880 Cooke's career nearly came to an end; the India Museum was discontinued, and the staff was placed on the pension list, or dismissed. However, in that year appeared the first part of what Cooke termed "the most ambitious work of his career"—a book, the likeness of which in its completeness was never produced in any other country—the *Illustrations of British Fungi*, a monumental work of eight volumes with 1200 plates, completed in 1891. No doubt, this work attracted Sir Joseph Hooker's attention, who asked for the transfer of Cooke's services to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, where he filled the post of first Cryptogamic Assistant until 1893. In 1883 *The Myxomycetes of Great Britain* appeared, an appreciation of Rostafinsky's methods. In 1889 this spirit, roaming and revelling in the natural kingdoms, published his *Toilers in the Sea*; in 1892, *The Vegetable Wasps and Plant Worms*; in 1893, *Romance of Low Life Among the Plants*; in 1894, *Handbook of British Hepaticae, and Edible and Poisonous Mushrooms*; in 1895, *Introduction to the Study of Fungi, Talks About Wild Flowers, Botanical Wall Charts for Use in Schools*; in 1906, *Fungoid Pests of Cultivated Plants*; in 1908 *Catalogue and Field Book of British Basidiomycetes for Use of Collectors*, etc., etc., etc.

In 1902 the Royal Horticultural Society conferred on him the Victorian Medal of Honour (V.M.H.), and in 1903 the Linnean Society honoured him with their gold medal.

During his long life he collected and preserved many thousands of fungi and other plants. In 1898 Kew acquired his private collections of some 46,000 specimens. He estimated that he drew over 14,000 figures as illustrations for his various works.

It was during his later years that I became intimately acquainted with this indefatigable man. We met twice monthly at that useful and interesting Institution of the Royal Horticultural Society, its Scientific Committee, which he attended in all sorts of weathers. He was a modest, kind old gentleman with a pronounced sense of humour. Unfortunately during his later years he was unable to work owing to the failure of his eyesight. The vision of one eye became totally obscured by cataract and the other partially so. He resignedly accepted the expert's dictum, saying "I have left my eyes behind in my microscope."

In 1912 through "inadvertence" Cooke's obituary notice appeared. But he remonstrated that this account was exaggerated and premature.

His faculties and his sense of humour remained with him until the very end. On the 19th of October he had a severe heart attack, and passed away quietly and painlessly on the 12th of November, 1914. Thus ended the career of another of our respected and valued pioneers in mycology.



